



1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Jerry Morrison)

# Strategic Attack

By HAL M. HORNBURG

**S**trategic attack is one of the most effective options for joint force commanders. Properly used, it can directly influence enemy leadership and significantly shape the joint campaign. Despite its potential, it is the least understood mission in the joint arena. This is a cultural phenomenon: the senior leaders of every service grew up with different perspectives of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. They also have different historical views of joint warfighting.

Much of the misunderstanding involves qualities often ascribed to various types of aircraft. Many view bombers in a Cold War context, identifying them with nuclear weapons and strategic bombardment conducted in World War II. The Air Force moved a decade ago to correct this image by

integrating strategic and tactical capabilities into a single functional organization, Air Combat Command. This change recognized that aircraft themselves are not strategic or tactical; their effects are strategic or tactical. Yet some still perceive fighters as tactical and bombers as strategic.

This outlook gives rise to skepticism outside the Air Force at the mention of strategic attack as an option. Moreover, it misses a chance to influence military thinking, because strategic attack is more than a mission—it is focused on defeating an enemy targeted as a system.

## Historical Perspectives

In the past the ultimate objective of war was engaging and defeating fielded enemy forces. The strength of opposing armies and navies determined the ability to resist. If defeated, the enemy capital and countryside were laid bare. Conflicts were often decided by a single decisive battle.

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**B-17s over Europe  
in September 1944.**

**in Europe, more than 60,000  
Allied airmen lost their lives  
in the combined bomber  
offensive alone**

The idea of victory changed with the industrial age. Land forces required vast resources to sustain operations, creating new vulnerabilities. Although supplies could be disrupted by cavalry-type action, only deep penetration by regular armies could threaten or destroy them. First, one had to defeat or at least deflect enemy forces.

Sherman's march through Georgia during the Civil War illustrates the effectiveness of this approach. Yet as mobility and firepower grew in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts, evenly-matched armies fought protracted wars of attrition to consume enemy assets. World War I was characterized by sustained attrition, with protagonists committing more men and matériel until the other side exhausted its assets.

Some theorists saw an alternative with the emergence of airpower in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They envisioned being emancipated from head-on battles of attrition. Instead, bombardment could directly attack enemy populations and infrastructure. Friendly land forces could engage an enemy and create a demand on its assets even as airpower cut off industrial production. With the resource base eliminated through air action, enemy forces would weaken and their will to fight would erode, leading to collapse and capitulation. Airpower theorists appreciated this concept from the start and refined it following World War I.

But theory and practice proved to be difficult to reconcile. With development of long-range bombers in the 1930s, the Royal Air Force and

U.S. Army Air Forces thought that this theory had been put into practice. With the outbreak of World War II, the Allies faced an anti-access scenario and turned to the only weapon available. British Lancasters and American B-17s demonstrated the potential to strike deep into Germany. However, a mismatch between offensive and defensive was clear. Both sides engaged in attrition in the skies over Europe. Ultimately, Allied forces won the key battle for air superiority in early 1944, opening the German heartland and its industrial capacity to direct and sustained aerial attack. Air superiority coupled with strategic bombardment devastated the enemy infrastructure, paving the way for victory. In the Pacific, airpower enabled strikes on Japan, culminating with the use of atomic weapons.

Both victories were costly. In Europe, more than 60,000 Allied airmen lost their lives in the combined bomber offensive alone. Yet the casualties would likely have been much higher and the war probably would have lasted longer without an alternative to surface warfare. Airpower and strategic bombardment indeed proved their ability to directly attack the homeland and resource base of the enemy, shortening the conflict.

Airmen continued to refine doctrine and improve capabilities after World War II. However both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts produced more lessons in attrition-based warfare. Vietnam, like World War I, provided glimpses of what could be done. Technological innovation in the form of laser-guided bombs hinted at precision attack. The Linebacker II campaign illustrated the impact of airpower on the will of enemy leaders when unleashed in appropriate strikes. But it would be two decades before these developments would be crystallized in a clear vision.

## **A New Age**

Another vision became clear in January 1991. Coalition forces led by the United States were tasked to eject the Iraqi army from Kuwait. Various strategies were considered, from a direct Air-Land Battle-type of assault to an air campaign focused on enemy political and military leaders. The joint force air component commander led the effort to refine and execute an air campaign plan that devastated the Iraqis in ways not directly connected to land warfare. U.S. Central Command largely adopted this plan as the centerpiece of its strategy. The resulting effort took advantage of both qualitative and quantitative advantages of coalition airpower and spacepower to directly attack the enemy ability to monitor and command forces and resources. At the same time, Iraqi units in the field, cut off from their command elements, came under direct air assault.

F-117 during live-fire weapons test.



U.S. Air Force (Edward Snyder)

The result was staggering. Advances in stealth technology, precision munitions, command and control, intelligence, and air defense suppression led to a revolution in the conduct of warfare. Stealth fighters struck leadership targets in Baghdad with unprecedented precision and significantly crippled the regime during the first hours of the conflict. Command networks were attacked and air defenses were blinded.

**the Gulf War realized a dream long held by airmen: unrestricted, aggressive use of airpower**

Infrastructure such as petroleum, power plants, and transport also were hit with remarkable effectiveness and minimal collateral damage. And civilian casualties were low. In the first day of operations, coalition air

forces attacked more targets than the Eighth Air Force in Europe during 1942 and 1943. When land forces crossed the border into Kuwait 38 days later, the Iraqis were all but routed.

Iraq fielded half a million battle-hardened troops and advanced aircraft and air defenses to protect its territory, but the war was one-sided. The Coalition did not do what the enemy expected—a symmetric ground attack—and instead concentrated airpower on the heart of the Iraqi military and command structure. The air plan sought to defeat the enemy as a system. To do this, it employed the concept of strategic attack.

Not simply a concept but a mission, strategic attack builds on the notion that it is possible to directly affect enemy sources of strength and will to fight without having to engage in extended attritional campaigns to defeat hostile forces. Consideration of an effects-based approach clarifies the essence of strategic attack. Modern societies are highly interconnected. With strategic attack,

an enemy can be affected by isolation, deception, or exploitation. Its forces can be severed from leaders and its capacity to sustain essential activity can be directly targeted. Given these factors, strategic attack can be defined as offensive action by command authorities to generate effects that most directly achieve national objectives by affecting enemy leadership, conflict-sustaining resources, and strategy.

While strategic attack in most instances will not totally eliminate the need to engage fielded forces—in certain cases attacking forces may accomplish strategic effects—it can shape engagements to fight at a time and place and under conditions favorable to decisive outcomes with the least risk to friendly forces. Under the right conditions, an aggressive use of airpower and spacepower in executing strategic attack may reduce land forces needed for termination, thus endangering fewer lives.

The Gulf War also highlighted another aspect of airpower and spacepower in conducting strategic attack: parallel operations. After the Vietnam conflict and through most of the Cold War, planners generally held a sequential view of air operations. Because the first prerequisite of every successful air and surface operation is requisite air superiority, airmen planned initially for an air defense suppression campaign. Once enemy defenses were dealt with, follow-on air attacks could commence. Desert Storm illustrated that precision and stealth capabilities enabled all manner of attacks to occur simultaneously. The possibility of holding everything at immediate risk—and providing overwhelming shock—is an important aspect of strategic attack.

### After the Storm

The Gulf War realized a dream long held by airmen: unrestricted, aggressive use of airpower to directly influence the outcome of warfare. Despite its success, and aside from arguments over sequencing both land and air components, Desert Storm can still be categorized as an industrial age conflict—a large conventional conflict with massed forces. Different wars would be waged in the 1990s for different ends, using the same tools but in different ways. Military power, and especially airpower and spacepower, would be tasked to conduct less than total war to perform tasks previously held unworkable: coercion and punishment. In each case, strategic attack evolved to occupy a more nuanced role.

*Operation Deliberate Force (Bosnia-Herzegovina).* The North Atlantic Treaty Organization had a problem in 1995. An intransigent Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, engaged in a program of ethnic cleansing that threatened to destabilize the Balkans. His indifference to appeals for peace



F-105s over Vietnam.



U.S. Air Force History Office

threatened Allied credibility. Serbian forces in Bosnia, although outnumbered, had clear numerical superiority in armored vehicles and artillery. They employed these forces with superior mobility to dominate Bosnian Muslim and Croatian troops. After a series of embarrassing incidents, NATO, with United Nations approval, launched air strikes to force Milosevic into negotiating.

The Alliance selected a straightforward strategy: air attack on the Bosnian Serb leaders and war-sustaining advantages. Fielded forces were not attacked as a principal objective. Instead key communications nodes, logistic infrastructure, and transportation lines were struck. These assets gave the Serbs superior mobility to create tactical advantages at the time and place of their choice. With these enablers eliminated, the Serbs found themselves on a par with the Bosnian Muslims and Croats. By putting Milosevic and his forces at risk, NATO held his objectives at risk.

Working from U.N. and Allied objectives, the combined forces air component commander developed the air operation plan to “execute a robust NATO air operation that adversely alters the [Bosnian Serb army] advantage in conducting successful military operations against [Bosnia and Herzegovina].” The desired endstate was compelling the Bosnian Serbs to sue for a cessation in military activity, comply with U.N. mandates, and agree to enter into negotiations.<sup>1</sup>

The effect of the air operation was almost immediate. The Serbian forces became isolated on battlefields which they previously dominated. A Croatian ground offensive in western Bosnia made the effects of NATO operations clear. Cut off and lacking their previous command, control,

and mobility advantages, the Serbs suffered the disadvantage of exterior lines of communication. The result was a near collapse of their resistance in that region.

Deliberate Force was an air operation designed to achieve a strategic effect, the coercion of Milosevic. Isolating Bosnian forces through selectively attacking critical leadership, infrastructure, and command and control targets brought him to the table. With these attacks, the Alliance could govern the pace of operations and either increase or decrease the pressure as necessary to achieve desired political and military effects. Importantly, precision attacks enabled the Alliance to sustain support by minimizing collateral damage and civilian casualties. The effectiveness of air operations was undeniable—it was due to the strategic application of airpower.

*Allied Force (Yugoslavia).* Milosevic again proved his indifference to international anxiety in 1998 over the treatment of Albanians in the semiautonomous area of Kosovo. After acquiescing to demands for more transparency, Milosevic ignored calls to protect ethnic Albanians. With the breakdown of negotiations, the Alliance initiated combat air operations once again.

NATO opted for another air operation for many of the same reasons that figured into its decision in 1995. But instead of initiating a regular, well-developed campaign, the thrust began as a repeat of Deliberate Force, with a series of limited air strikes calculated to pressure Milosevic to negotiate. Thus the initial target sets were strictly limited to a similar set of air defense, command and control, and limited military infrastructure targets. But Milosevic did not respond in the same manner that he had in 1995. Instead, almost simultaneous with the start of the operation, he began ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, changing the character of the war.

Public opinion demanded that NATO forces counter ethnic cleansing and protect the fleeing Albanians. The planners were caught short. They had been told not to look beyond limited strikes initially and had no means of significant change beyond the signaling mission. As political leaders sought consensus within the Alliance on the direction of the war, coalition planners were instructed to keep the pressure on Milosevic and increase operations against the Serbian forces in Kosovo and military infrastructure targets surrounding the province.

During a month of strategic uncertainty, a debate emerged among Alliance leaders that led to two views. One held that it was necessary and sufficient for air forces to sustain their attacks on fielded forces to ease pressure on the Albanians



100th Communications Squadron (Randy Mallard)

**B-52s on mission,  
Allied Force.**

and weaken control over the province by Belgrade. The reason for a limited operation was that little agreement existed for anything else, especially for the introduction of ground forces. In fact, even planning for wider activity threatened cohesion. The other view, largely advanced by Allied air planners, contended that airpower was not suitable in stopping deployed Serbian forces engaged in ethnic cleansing. Instead, the most effective way of gaining compliance with NATO demands was applying direct pressure on Yugoslav leaders and their political and social apparatus. In sum, if airpower is the instrument of choice, it must be used in its most decisive form—strategic attack. As one senior officer commented, “Airpower could not stop the door-to-door . . . thugery and ethnic cleansing . . . directly. The only way [was] taking it to the heart of the matter—in this case, to Belgrade.”<sup>2</sup>

Largely because of the ineffectiveness of limited air operations, enough support emerged to conduct a more direct attack on strategic assets to bring about compliance with Alliance demands. According to the air component commander, U.S. European Command was certain that sustained and parallel operations could be conducted with available airpower and that forces in Kosovo could

be attacked while other “more lucrative and compelling targets” were struck in Serbia proper.<sup>3</sup>

Thus NATO expanded the air operation from the Kosovo-centric attrition of forces to more attacks on political-military leadership and dual-use facilities. Some assets of the ruling elite were deliberately targeted to put pressure on Milosevic and cause more stress within Serbia. The attacks on Serbian forces in Kosovo were maintained. Up to half of daily sorties were flown against them with mixed results. Although there is evidence that attacks limited the enemy ability to mass and maneuver, the extent to which they pressured Belgrade to eventually comply is less apparent.

The strikes against political and industrial infrastructure had more telling effects. The price of a sustained conflict was becoming evident. Bombing and sanctions were devastating an already soft economy. Raids on factories led to layoffs, driving up unemployment. Attacks on businesses owned by associates of Milosevic bred tension and uncertainty. Cutting electrical and fuel supplies not only limited military options but dramatically increased anxiety. The strikes on Serbia far more than attacks on fielded forces in Kosovo

compelled Milosevic to relent. It was strategic attack—in this case using airpower and spacepower—that had the desired coercive effect.

*Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan)*. Another application of strategic attack that employed joint air as well as space assets against enemy leaders and resources was Afghanistan beginning in 2001. In the opening stages of the operation, airpower and spacepower was used to induce Taliban forces to flee and to destroy terrorist bases.

### airpower and spacepower was used to induce Taliban forces to flee and to destroy terrorist bases

As a result, in conjunction with support to local fighters, coalition air and maritime forces, and Special Operations Forces, the regime in Kabul was changed within two months. The asymmetry of modern air and space capabilities supported by surface operations resulted in the desired strategic effect.

In the above conflicts, strategic attack was the choice of U.S. leadership. NATO airpower twice coerced an enemy to meet its demands. On both occasions the Alliance pressured a regime to comply through attacks on essential resources, carefully selected for the effect on decisionmakers. At the same time, the attacks avoided the civilian casualties and collateral urban damage associated with earlier bombing campaigns and enabled NATO to use enough pressure to end both conflicts. In Afghanistan, air and space forces projected asymmetric power rapidly, lessening the vulnerabilities, risks, and time normally associated with deploying large ground forces. Although some civilian casualties and collateral damage did occur, the losses paled in comparison to three years of fighting in Bosnia, a decade of repression in Kosovo, and the suffering of the Afghan people, as well as continued global terrorism had the Taliban remained in power.

America has been involved in four significant conflicts over the last decade. In each case, joint airpower and spacepower provided compelling asymmetric advantages to achieve the desired effects. The potential of strategic attack was demonstrated in arguably the most effective, efficient, and humane military operations in history. The ability to directly apply force on enemy leadership, constrict resources, and restrict strategic choices is a valuable tool in an increasingly hostile world. With advances in air, space, and information capabilities, desired effects can be increased through these capabilities. In that regard, two factors are noteworthy:

- Asymmetric advantages in the battlespace derive increasingly from U.S. air, space, and information capabilities.

- These capabilities allow the Nation to directly influence enemy leadership, destroy or neutralize enemy resources, and control the pace of enemy operations while minimizing collateral damage and civilian casualties.

The national leadership is calling on strategic attack as the mission of choice to coerce, punish, and compel enemies. To support such objectives, the military must consider the best way of achieving this new type of mission.

Strategic attack is critical for joint operations. The extent to which each service contributes to this mission depends on the situation and corresponding objectives. Strategic attack provides joint force commanders with a flexible option to strike enemies and achieve effects on the strategic level. Doctrine is being written to articulate enduring tenets of strategic attack and enhance understanding of the concept in the joint community. Developing and employing these capabilities provides the Armed Forces with a range of options to achieve military objectives. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael O. Beale, "Bombs Over Bosnia: The Role of Airpower in Bosnia-Herzegovina," student thesis, School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., 1996, [https://research.maxwell.af.mil/papers/student/ay1996/saas/beale\\_mo.pdf](https://research.maxwell.af.mil/papers/student/ay1996/saas/beale_mo.pdf), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Tirpak, "Lessons Learned and Relearned," *Air Force Magazine*, vol. 82, no. 8 (August 1999), pp. 23–25.

<sup>3</sup> John A. Tirpak, "Short's View of the Air Campaign," *Air Force Magazine*, vol. 82, no. 9 (September 1999), pp. 50–55.